



## Wecht legal team tries to head off indictment

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By Dennis B. Roddy, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Lawyers for Allegheny County Medical Examiner Dr. Cyril H. Wecht yesterday asked U.S. Justice Department officials in Washington to forestall a possible federal criminal indictment of the renowned forensic pathologist -- an indictment observers said could come as early as today.

Sources close to the investigation said that barring intervention from Washington, a grand jury was expected to return an indictment against Dr. Wecht and possibly two other persons. The sources provided information on condition of anonymity because of grand jury secrecy rules.

If he is indicted, Dr. Wecht would be required to resign his position under terms of an agreement his attorneys signed when he became medical examiner.

The grand jury hearing evidence against Dr. Wecht was extended beyond its original term last year, but is expected to conclude its work this month.

Three members of Dr. Wecht's legal team -- lawyer Mark Rush, former U.S. Attorney J. Alan Johnson and former U.S. Attorney General Dick Thornburgh -- met with prosecutors in Pittsburgh Jan. 5. Neither side has been willing to divulge details of the meeting, although, based on interviews yesterday, it appears that the defense lawyers left with the impression that U.S. Attorney Mary Beth Buchanan would advise them prior to asking grand jurors to return an indictment.

The federal probe has focused on Dr. Wecht's tenure as Allegheny County coroner, an office that was eliminated early this year as part of the reform of the county's row offices.

FBI agents focused on whether Dr. Wecht used coroner's office employees to perform personal chores, including chauffeuring him and family members to and from airports and personal appearances, and whether Dr. Wecht used county resources in the operation of his private pathology business, Cyril H. Wecht and Pathology Associates.

Dr. Wecht was appointed to the newly created post of medical examiner on Dec. 29 by county Chief Executive Dan Onorato.

At the time, Mr. Onorato termed Dr. Wecht's role as "interim" and said the appointment was contingent on Dr. Wecht's willingness to step down if the federal investigation resulted in an indictment or plea agreement.

The Wecht case is one of three grand jury probes that have focused on county and city government in the past two years.

Last year, a grand jury returned a multiple-count indictment against Dennis Skosnik, chief deputy sheriff of Allegheny County, charging him with wide-ranging corruption.

Another grand jury probe has focused on whether then-Pittsburgh Mayor Tom Murphy traded a generous contract with the city's firefighters for their union's endorsement in the 2001 Democratic mayoral primary. No charges have been brought in that probe.

In the case of Dr. Wecht, grand jurors heard testimony from dozens of witnesses who were asked about instances in which coroner's deputies drove Dr. Wecht and his family to and from Pittsburgh International Airport for private trips, and other instances in which they chauffeured visiting experts to and from the airport during an annual Wecht-sponsored symposium on medicine and the law at Duquesne University.

The investigation was triggered after a turf war between Dr. Wecht and Allegheny County District Attorney Stephen A. Zappala Jr. over the coroner's powers to conduct independent hearings into homicide cases.

The dispute spilled over into allegations that Dr. Wecht had used his county office for private work -- a charge that had put Dr. Wecht in the defendant's chair once before.

In 1981 a state grand jury brought charges of theft-of-services against Dr. Wecht, alleging he had mixed public and private business as coroner. A jury acquitted Dr. Wecht.

In a related civil case in 1983, a judge ordered Dr. Wecht to repay the county \$252,416 for performing private work at the morgue. He later paid \$200,000 to settle the case.

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*(Staff writer Paula Reed Ward contributed. Dennis Roddy can be reached at droddy@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1965.)*

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